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Gary M. Burge

A Jesus Quest Without a Compass? Article-Review

Dr Burge, who teaches at Wheaton College and is the author of the NIV Application Commentaries on John and 1-3 John takes a critical look at Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography, by Bruce Chilton (New York: Doubleday, 2000. 330 pp. hb. \$25. ISBN 0-385-49792-X)

Today contributions to research on the life of Jesus continue unabated. Some are wrestling with methodological issues and tracing the history of the current debate (e.g. Meier, Witherington). Others seek to interpret Jesus within a fresh theological paradigm (Wright, Sanders) while still others, particularly those associated with the so-called 'Jesus Seminar' continue to fashion a minimalist Jesus with criteria developed over the last 50 years (Borg, Crossan). Of course, there continues to be a large number of scholars who remain fundamentally confident in the basic historical portrait of the gospels and continue to illumine the traditional story with historical or cultural background (Blomberg, McKnight).

Bruce Chilton's new book, *Rabbi Jesus*, is difficult to fit into any of these categories. Its subtitle announces that this is an 'intimate biography' of Jesus and its publisher has mounted a terrific campaign promoting the book. The book jacket tells us: 'Chilton uncovers truths lost to history and reveals a new Jesus for the new millennium.' When statements like this are combined with a glowing prominent endorsement by the controversial John Shelby Spong ('A dynamic book by a penetrating thinker') the reader begins to suspect that something unusual is afoot. And so it is.

Without any explanation of method or justification of his historical decisions, Chilton offers us a Jesus-book that – as Donald Senior labeled it – has more to do with fiction than it does with painstaking historical scholarship. At least when Gerd Theissen attempted to 'fictionalize' the life of Christ (*The Shadow of the Galilean*, 1986) his chapter-by-chapter exchange with his 'fictional' reader (Dr. Kratzipger) let him explain the historical judgments he was making in the narrative. *Rabbi Jesus* gives us nothing of the kind. Instead the book ends with a series of notes that tell us where many of the author's ideas came from or what general texts the reader can use for followup. But the uninformed reader has no idea just how controversial these decisions are.

Chilton's *Life of Jesus*

A brief outline of Jesus' life (according to Chilton) tells the whole story: Jesus grows up in Nazareth but is rejected by his community because word of his illegitimate birth is widespread. He cannot attend synagogue, is rejected from religious observance, and because he does not attend school, is illiterate. This forms the first psychological crisis in his life: anger at a judgmentalism that shuns the outsider and the outcast, that excludes him completely from synagogue life, leaves an indelible mark on him that will never be resolved. In fact, it will ignite the fury that will lead to his ultimate conflict with authorities in Jerusalem.

The second crisis comes when he is twelve and his father, Joseph, dies unexpectedly. Jesus' inner turmoil is acute and now without a father-figure, he is adrift, seeking an 'Abba' who will restore his lost sense of identity. Again his anger grows and soon it becomes apparent that this trauma shapes his life: he becomes resentful, bitter, and defensive. He wanders the countryside aimlessly.

In his anger and confusion, Jesus abandons his family at 12 without warning during a trip to Jerusalem and becomes a rebellious son, scrounging and begging. He is known for irrational outbursts and lives a critical, lonely life. He is thin and 'scraggly' and has stunted growth thanks to malnutrition. At 18 he has not only learned to alter his consciousness through starvation, but also meets John the Baptist in the desert who becomes his theological tutor and a proxy father figure. Here he learns about daily washings for sin and further self-deprivation as a key to spiritual enlightenment. But in the end he competes with John and must break away – which makes him return 'home' to Nazareth to see if there is a place for him.

But when he gets there not only the town but his own family finds him embarrassing. Tensions flair with his brother James. Jesus' disgust with Nazareth and affluent Capernaum overwhelms him. The paganism of Antipas frustrates him – and when the ruler builds Tiberias (on a Jewish cemetery) Jesus is furious. He sees the land as demonized and becomes an active exorcist. He also becomes an itinerant preacher in Galilee, rejecting the purity rituals of the religious (who had shunned him earlier) and promoting sumptuous feasts as a model of the kingdom of God. When his family finally has had enough of the shame and the financial burden, they toss him out.

On a Tabernacles visit to Jerusalem Jesus begins to exhibit bipolar tendencies. His mystical visions (like Zechariah's vision of Jerusalem) empower him so that he joins the ranks of 'healers, shamans, witch doctors, and sorcerers' – and his depression and anger swing him into moods that are dangerously low. Jerusalem is troubling to him.

The great engine of Jewish piety seems far from God. During one Hanukkah feast he recalls the successes of the Maccabees and wonders if God could be calling him to 'take' Jerusalem and purify it.

When he returns to Galilee after some time he begins to attract followers. He lives with Peter, has a reputation as a 'carousing drunkard,' enjoys parties, and likely has an intimate sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene. Chilton suggests that by this time Jesus' successes have freed him from manual work. Short, overweight, and tending toward baldness, Jesus develops a 'paunch' (which, we learn, 'strengthens his voice').

But as Jesus' fame grows in Galilee, so do the political worries of Herod Antipas. Soon Jesus is a hunted man who gathers followers around him, travels to deep northern Galilee, and begins to think about violent rebellion. He obsesses about his own death and resolves this inner tension with self-induced moments of ecstasy and transcendence, employing teaching about selfannihilation as an avenue to mystical release. In his visions he sees himself as part of the heavenly court, an angelic being perhaps, which even further isolates him from the commonplace world around him. Once at Bethsaida his family comes to him (to rescue him?) but he rejects them completely.

But the temptation to power (attested in the gospel temptation stories) remains with him. Soon he has an 'army' of 5,000 who join him in dreams of overthrowing Antipas and finally cleansing Galilee. And to him this seems increasingly plausible as his ecstatic visions of paradise increase, removing him from the world and reality. A turning point occurs on a mountain where he is 'transfigured' – which culminates his ability to enter an ecstatic state exhaustively, making paradise (not Galilee) his point of reference. Chilton writes, 'Jesus seemed unbounded by his physical body; he was like Elijah, defiant of time and space' (197).

The threat of Antipas, however, brings Jesus back to reality like a slap and he sees that a revolt will not work. Therefore he travels south to Jerusalem one autumn with thirty people convinced that even if an army could not defeat Antipas, still the apocalypse driven by the power of God would. Fired by the Targum of Zechariah 14:21 ('there shall never again be a trader in the sanctuary of the Lord of Hosts at that time'), he readies for a conflict with the Temple. *En route* he tells Jews to stop paying taxes to the Temple – and by this uses 'the language of Galilean revolution' (202).

When Jesus arrives at Jerusalem it is Tabernacles and his band is now 200 strong. He 'is primed for contention'. His triumphant procession into the city makes him 'delirious' as crowds scream aloud their desire for a new kingdom. And as he enters the Temple he is overcome by the commercial trades in coin and animal he finds

there. Using a preset signal (the cry: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer!') his band of 200 now attacks the marketplace and many violent militants who attached themselves to him even commit murder. Caiaphas recognizes in that moment that Jesus is a lethal opponent who must be eliminated.

While Jesus successfully flees the city, his disciple Barabbas is caught and interrogated. But Jesus spends the winter hiding in the eastern deserts and in Bethany. Caiaphas' fears find a solution when he colludes with Pilate to destroy Jesus, but since Jesus is politically 'out of his depth' he cannot comprehend the forces arrayed against him in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, he remains at the edge of the desert, spoiling for conflict and arguing with Pharisees. But now Jesus' practiced mysticism takes on another aspect: he begins to see suffering and even death as a transport to realms seen only through visions. His willingness to die – his determination to die – places Mary Magdalene in a frenzy because of her desperate love for Jesus.

When the final confrontation comes, Jesus is well known for his practice of offering fellowship meals which (in his mind) replace the sacrificial rituals of the Temple. And this challenge triggers outrage among the Pharisees and priests. Following his arrest, his interrogation turns on religious themes and Pilate never speaks with Jesus. And so he is led out to the Mount of Olives where he is crucified and then buried on the shoulder of Mt. Zion. Later Jesus turns into an angel.

Methodological Problems

Such a story line will astonish the average reader of the New Testament. Reconstructions of Jesus' life are commonplace, but most employ historical restraint, adding detail only where it is warranted by the evidence. Chilton warns against writers who fail to use this restraint: 'Revisionism can be productive. But it can also become more intent on explaining away traditional beliefs than on coming to grips with the evidence at hand!' (270). It would not be farfetched to say that this exhortation applies to his own book as thoroughly as to any. When Chilton does give us some historical justification for his revision of Jesus' life, his arguments fail to convince. Here are a few examples:

The background for this 'life of Jesus' often come from sources few would include in this kind of historical research. For instance, the Talmud becomes the template for Jesus' practice of mysticism (280). And where does this lead? We are told that Jesus had no confidence in the written Torah and was a mystic. It was only the spoken word

'that was sacred' to Jesus (140). He becomes a practitioner of kabbalistic magic described to us from Talmudic sources in *Midrash Hashkem* but nowhere are we given an argument indicating the validity or dating of using such a source (244).

Likewise Chilton uses the Gospel of Hebrews (283), Eusebius's stories of the apostles (284), the apocryphal Acts of Andrew (129), and the 4th century book Praise of Barnabas (112, 255) as instructive sources for Jesus' life without weighing their value. It is ironic that the basic outline of the Gospel of Mark is rejected and in its place are sources few have seen introduced into this discussion.

When Chilton does use the gospels many surprising things result. For instance, we learn that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem in Judea, but that Joseph his father was from Bethlehem of Galilee. Again, Chilton takes his lead from the Talmud which refers to such a Galilean town (as does Josh 19:15). Then we learn the following: 'Now, however, archaeological excavations show that Bethlehem in Galilee is a first-century site just seven miles from Nazareth' (9). I recently asked James Strange, one of the senior field archaeologists of Galilee, to comment on this and he was incredulous. Bet Lahm (west of Sepphoris) was partially excavated by some graduate students from Haifa University but nothing significant has been found. Strange has visited the site many times and cannot even locate the tell (just some tombs and surface debris). With one email, Chilton could put to rest a notion he claims to have held since he was a graduate student

But exegesis of specific texts is likewise unpredictable and it is hard to understand what method is at work. In Mt 17:24-27 Jesus resolves the question of taxes by having Peter remove a coin from the mouth of a fish in order to pay them. Chilton reverses the plain meaning of the story and says that Jesus was telling the authorities to 'go fish' if they wanted tax money – Jesus was *refusing* to pay (202)! It should come as no surprise that Chilton believes that Matthew completely misrepresented Jesus (141) and that the common practice in the early church was to create sayings of Jesus in order to fit a later context. For instance, after AD 70 the early Christians distorted Jesus' critique of Jerusalem's temple into a prophesy of the city's conquest. 'When the Romans actually burned down the Temple, Christians twisted Jesus' words and deeds into a prophecy of destruction' (231).

When anyone finishes reading this book, they have the impression that anything is acceptable as a plausible revision of the gospel. The outline above – from Jesus' near assault on Antipas to his love-affair with Mary to his Tabernacles Temple cleansing – are each so speculative that one feels like the limits of plausibility are being strained.

Where is there the solid backing in reliable sources for the negative

– even shocking portrait of Jesus that results from all this? Is there really any firm basis for describing Jesus as an illegitimate, illiterate, ostracized, critical, lonely child prone to irrational outbursts? Was he traumatized by his family and village, venturesome and rebellious, able to manipulate scripture? Where is the solid evidence that he was a resentful beggar, cocky, scraggly and with stunted growth? Was he sinful and angry, testy, and defensive and xenophobic – even embittered by the world, struggling with his sharp wisdom and wicked tongue? Was he really bipolar and prone to trances and hypnotic states, drinking excessively, sexually active, short, bald, entering adulthood with a ‘paunch?’ Each of these descriptors can be found in the book describing Jesus, but where is there reliable evidence for them? And, if this is what Jesus was really like, the development of Christian veneration of him becomes totally incomprehensible. A crucial criterion for the historicity of any picture of the earthly Jesus is whether it makes good sense as the starting point for the development of the subsequent Jesus-tradition in the early church.

There are even times when we are not confident that the author understands some of the basic things about land in which Jesus moves. For example, we learn that the wadis (or river canyons) that feed the Jordan hold melting snow and so the river is icy cold (40). And we learn that once the Jordan valley was densely wooded: ‘lush, green with tamarisks, vines, and swaying reeds, jungle-like even in the middle of winter’ (40). In December of 2000 I appeared with Chilton on a two hour radio talk show in Chicago that focused on his book. During a news break I asked him how he knew that the Jordan Valley was once a jungle. Basically a tour guide told him.

Or when we learn about the burial place of Jesus (272), the book makes a fundamental mistake about Jerusalem. Chilton believes that the present church of the Holy Sepulchre was inside Jerusalem’s first century city walls and that there is no evidence of a first century cemetery there. He is wrong on both counts. Instead we are told that Jesus was crucified on the Mount of Olives and buried on the shoulder of Mount Zion near Caiaphas’ tomb. No archaeologists known to me would hold such a view.

A Terribly Modern Jesus

By the close of the book, it becomes apparent that Chilton’s Jesus has the frustrated political aspirations of, say, Albert Schweitzer’s Christ, mixed in with the dreamy, mysticism of the New Age. Jesus now can be compared with Buddha (244) – no longer is his mission about salvation history and the redemption of persons or Israel, but about

learning how we are all intimately connected, and that the cycle of life which we possess is also the same cycle held by every other living thing. In this thoroughly modern Jesus both hypnotism (155) and extreme meditation that elevates us to an 'astral plane' (195) provide avenues to a new, enriched 'realized eschatology' that will satisfy the modern palate. Jesus has even become a feminist, teaching us that 'femininity is more than a matter of gender' and that the image of God was both male and female (145). While Jesus undoubtedly gave women a unique place in his ministry, still, it is hard to think of thoughts like these coming from the first century.

In the end, this modern gospel has to be emptied of any christology. Jesus becomes a man of deep inner psychological turmoil whose inner conflicts are exactly like mine. Ostracized by his village – abandoned in childhood by his father's death – Jesus spends his adulthood trying to reassemble his own 'inner child of the past.' God becomes his new Abba and the Jewish leadership (which once judged him) now falls under his own (and God's) apocalyptic judgment. Was he a divine messenger? Did he think of himself as God's Son? This is where Christianity made its 'fundamental mistake' (172). Jesus' had visions of himself joining the heavenly court, mystical visions of himself in splendor, angelic and glorified but *no different* than anyone else who followed his way to paradise.

The Sum of the Matter

It is bewildering why scholars such as John Meier, Jacob Neusner, Craig Evans, and Frederick Borsch would write strong endorsements that appear on the back cover of this book. Dynamic and penetrating? Plausible and imaginative? Authentic and profound? Informed and masterful? These words would be a fitting description of Meier's two-volume study *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (1991, 1994) but are not *apropos* when referring to this book. 'Rabbi Jesus is as close as any reader is likely to get to the historical Jesus,' comments one dust jacket reviewer. But if this is the case, we likewise should admit Scorsese's controversial film, 'The Last Temptation of Christ' into the list of scholarly contributions to Jesus' life. Scorsese builds a portrait of Jesus that is just as plausible as that of Chilton.

Our greatest worry as New Testament scholars should be the abandonment of the historical rigor that has generally accompanied scholarly contributions to Jesus studies. It doesn't mean that a lively and personal style which makes Jesus 'come alive' has to be sacrificed – but it certainly means that solutions to historical puzzles, interpretations of important passages, and decisions about Jesus' aims must

all benefit from the fruit of scholarly research over the past 100 years. When this progress is jettisoned and replaced by any creative formula that gives a stimulating new portrait of Jesus, the outcome – as in *Rabbi Jesus* – will have more to do with fiction than anything else.

In his survey of 18th and 19th century 'lives of Jesus', Albert Schweitzer outlined in detail the efforts of many scholars to rebuild Jesus' life along 'modern' lines. In his critique of the French writer Renan, Schweitzer cites numerous critics. In an essay written in 1864, E. Luthardt summed up the deficiencies of Renan's portrait of Jesus by simply saying, 'It lacks conscience' (*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 191). This is the same criticism that must be lodged here – and for the same reason. Professing to write a scientific work, Renan (and Chilton) both penned books aimed to please trends in the popular imagination. And this problem, Luthardt argued, historians would find difficult to forgive.

Abstract

The article offers a summary of Bruce Chilton's recent book, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* and discusses the methodological problems which it raises. It is argued that the reconstruction of the life of Jesus is not sufficiently historically rigorous.

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